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Creative Project Rationale

I chose to do my creative project on *The Walking Dead* in large part because the series was one I was already familiar with prior to the class. This project became an illustration because that is a creative medium I not only enjoy, but regularly participate in outside of class, which allowed me to work most freely and put my effort into thinking about what I wanted to say, rather than how I would say it. Plus, as a graphic novel, the title already began with visual elements to draw on and this appealed to me as an artist on a time crunch. The most striking images I associate with the series, however, come from the video game adaptation by Telltale Games. Futhermore, I find this medium is also the one best suited to a creative yet critical project because it puts the onus on the player/reader, rather than a character. In particular, this spin-off focuses heavily on choices and their consequences, staying faithful to the spirit of its source material by making the zombies secondary to human relationships and behavior, so transferring this format back to the comic is natural and appealing.

Throughout the five segments of the game (called episodes), players are presented with a series of choices that ultimately determine not only who lives or dies, but how all the survivors in the game will get along. Whenever these choices come up, the player is presented with several options, usually ranging from diplomatic to aggressive behavior, and a timer will count down, forcing them to react. There is little to no time for weighing consequences, let alone internal philosophical debates. I originally wanted to do a series of illustrations, but was only able to complete the final showdown between Rick and Shane. This was a clear choice to illustrate, however, because it crystalizes so much of their characterization. As Rick is the protagonist, his choices were the ones I put on “the screen” of the image. He could shoot Shane (or at least try to), he could call for help (Rick’s stronger relationships are part of why he survives, after all), he could do nothing (foolish, but technically an option), or he could attempt to talk Shane down, which is what he does in the comic. I purposefully arranged the choices to put Rick’s solution (talking) closer to him in the image, while Shane’s violent, aggressive choice is closer to the right.

The colors of my illustration were something I was able to play with a little more freely because the comic is monochrome, and I was able to layer some additional significance onto the conflict by adding this element. I kept the background muted not just to mimic the style of the video game and focus on the characters, but also to show the encroachment of winter. The woods are not lush and green, but dull (not quite dead) browns contrasted by with the cool shades of early morning air. The browns carried over to their jackets as part of a uniform, but each man also is wearing a scarf and gloves, and I used these pieces to comment on their narrative positions through color. Rick receives blue, coded as calmer, reasonable, nurturing, and even heroic. On the other neck, Shane wears a warning color, red: aggressive, violent, impulsive, and dangerous. (In another popular game, Bioware’s Mass Effect, blue is explicitly coded as moral, and red is “renegade.”) His hat being black is simply because that is the most logical choice based on the comics and that it is a police cap, but it does play into the “black hat” of Western showdowns, further signifying Shane as an enemy. As an added bonus, the layout of Xbox controls mapped these colors to their positions in the image, and their respective game choice. For the other two options, I chose green for the most communal choice because of “growth,” while yellow is associated with cowardice, a possibly explanation for not acting at all.

One of the biggest goals in staging this piece was to highlight the threat Shane represents. I directly referenced a panel from the comic when working on Shane (even pasting in and painting straight over the gun when time ran short), one where he is tense and aggressive and leveling the shotgun at Rick. This is a purposefully dangerous image: his expression is wild, with purple bags under slightly sunken eyes, and his face is red not just from the cold, but from rage. Rick has similar elements in his own face, thanks to stress and the elements, but his posture and expression counter any threat these colors would otherwise signify. His hands are up and he is unarmed, and by putting his back to the screen, this shows him as someone players/viewers are supposed to relate to and further distances his narrative position from Shane, something a different angle would fail to capture.